

Malthus: a false prophet

By Aftab Ahmad

While the World Population Day was being observed on July 11, concern once again was expressed in Pakistan over the rate of population growth. As the rapid growth in population has put serious pressure on the country's available resources, the government, therefore, has decided to take all possible measures to bring down the population growth rate from 2.06 per cent to 1.9 per cent.

Population planning, no doubt is necessary, but it would be unfair to put the entire blame on the population growth. Successive governments should also bear the responsibility for failing to develop the country's human and physical resources. Although, the country came into being 55 years back, the literacy rate still is high at 50 per cent, agriculture sector faces shortage of irrigation water, water logging and salinity and low productivity per hectare etc., the share of manufacturing sector in the GDP remains static at 18 per cent, and the country remains dependent on imports for bulk of its requirements of machinery, electrical and mechanical goods and transport equipments etc.

As far as mineral exploration is concerned, we have been depending on friendly countries like China and some western countries, since we do not have the educated and trained workforce required for it. We have not been able to increase our resources in line with the growth in population resulting in increased unemployment and poverty. Even if the population growth is brought down to zero, the unemployment and poverty would remain unsolved unless the government develops resources and puts the economy on rapid and sustained development.

Experience has shown that the population poses no problem if the country has the ability and willingness to work hard. The US has the third largest population in the world after China and India, but still it is the largest and the most prosperous economy with per capita income of \$34,870. China has the largest population in the world at 1.27 billion. A few decades ago it was a low income country (LIC). With hard work in the last few decades China was able to substantially improve its literacy percentage and per capita income. To-day it is categorized as a lower-middle income country (LMC), with great potential for the future.

Similarly, Japan has a surface area of only 378,000km compared to 796,000km of Pakistan and it has a population of 127.1 million compared to 141.5 million of Pakistan (as of 2001). Still, Japan has never complained about its being over-populated and it is the second largest economy in the world after the US, with per capita income of \$35,990. The examples clearly show that large population has never prevented a country from achieving progress and prosperity for its people. The planners and economists in Pakistan had been very fond of quoting Malthus, who had presented his well-known population theory in 1798. Malthus had painted a gloomy picture by saying that while food resources increased in arithmetical progression (1,2,3,4), population had a tendency to increase in geometrical progression (1,2,4,8). Therefore, unless the population was held in check through 'preventive measures' like late marriages and moral restraint etc., nature would apply its own positive checks in the form of floods, earthquakes and epidemics etc., to ensure a balance between population growth and increase in food resources.

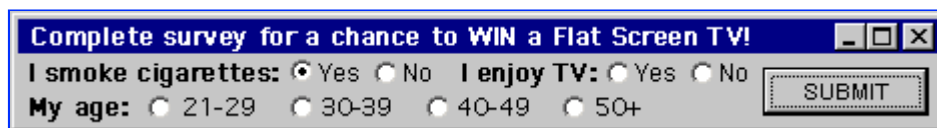
The theory of population presented by Malthus had sent an alarm across the globe during his own lifetime. However, later, when scientific methods of cultivation made it possible to increase agricultural

output to almost any level and, at the same time, the discovery and use of contraceptives made it possible to effectively check population, Malthus was labelled as a false prophet, because his theory had fallen flat in the face of advancements made by the science and technology.

In the present-day world, the optimum theory of population is in fact more popular. This theory states that for every country there is a certain optimum level of population which, at a given point of time, is required to exploit its resources in the best possible manner. If the population is below the optimum level, the resources of the country would remain partly unutilized. On the contrary, if the population is above the optimum level, a certain percentage of the population was likely to remain unemployed. This theory is certainly more realistic, since it rightly acknowledges that neither a large population is always a curse nor a small population is always a blessing.

In the present-day world, countries having large population have tried to use scientific and technical knowledge to multiply their resources, while holding their population growth in check at the same time. However, there are also some countries having population below the optimum level. Such countries have to partly depend on immigrant labour. There are many such countries in the Middle East, Gulf and the West, where the immigrant labour is working side by side with the local population. Unfortunately, because of our failure to achieve economic progress, the Malthusian theory still holds good in Pakistan. The agriculture sector has been faced with a multitude of problems, as stated in the preceding paragraphs, and poverty remains rampant in the rural areas of the country. As regards population growth, due to high illiteracy, people lack awareness about desirable family size and family planning. The country's resources could not be developed due to a host of problems such as the lack of educated, trained workforce, scientific and technical knowledge, capital, political and regional instability and social and economic problems.

Today, we have an agriculture which is largely dependent on weather conditions, a manufacturing sector which is weak having a low share in the GDP, and a mining sector bulk of which remains unexplored and unexploited. Instead of blaming the population growth, the government should sincerely endeavour for the development of the country's human and physical resources. By developing the country's human capital, accelerating rate of the GDP growth, Pakistan could also overcome the problem of poverty and unemployment. What the government actually needs to do is to strike a balance between the growth of population and the development of country's resources. The latter is in fact more important, as it holds the key to finding new resources for the population and turning it into an asset rather than a liability.



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